

'Challenging Narratives and Images of Domesticity: Murder and Social Change in North Kensington, London'

Thanks Charlotte and Eloise for organising these workshops and thank you for inviting me.

Apologies to colleagues who've heard me talk about this case before, I hope you'll find something new in this paper.

Picture the scene.

A dirty grey folder scattered with coloured stickers and handwritten labels appears, by invisible hands, in the bright orange plastic locker with my number on it. I snatch it up greedily, sidestepping impatiently through not-so-Automatic doors, racing (but sensibly) back to the ancient leather and wood table where I was waiting for forty minutes that felt like a hundred. The bright yellow production slip whips out of the pages, either by my haste or the bitterly over-powerful air conditioning. I catch it before it hits the government-issue carpet tiles.

Of all its codes and ciphers I recognise only my name and seat number besides the file reference 'CRIM 1/2783.' My serious-faced neighbours don't look up from their 'FO' brown boxes and crumbling leather-bound 'WO' books as I take my seat but I know they'll be similarly stealing a glance at my file to see which collection I'm looking at. With my pre-approved pencil (NO INK, NO ERASER) and poor-man's Moleskine, I carefully copy down all the stamps and stickers fixed to the cover, resisting the urge to rip off the frayed, once-white fabric tape straight away.

One of the labels reads 'MURDER' in capitals. Another says 'Warning: Images may cause distress' and I start to imagine distressing images of murder and wonder how high or low my distress threshold might be. I gingerly open the cover like I'm trying not to release the distress. Inside I find a motley collection of ephemera, loosely held with punched holes and treasury tags.

And I can't wait. I don't read every word. Instead I fly through dozens of lightly foxed tracing-paper thin pages covered in regular lines of mechanical type. The margins are decorated with lines, crosses and circles in blue and red coloured pencil. Buried beneath them, a creased and aged envelope, several sheets of handwriting in biro, two torn scraps of wallpaper with little sketches on the back, and, paired up in plastic sleeves, nine glossy, black and white photographs of someone's kitchen.

Monochrome. Flat and grey but bearing the unmistakable markers of life. A homemade chair. Laminated tabletop. A chest of drawers, one of them hasn't quite been shut properly. Clothes hanging in a wardrobe. A radio. A typewriter in a case. A fireplace. The wheel of a push-bike, worn patches trodden into the floor. A cooker, bin, stool, bucket, plates, kettle, teacups... I look up and around for someone with whom I might share my archival joy, for here in my hands is everything I hoped I would find, and more besides. But with all eyes in the room silently and obediently glued to their papers, mine fall back to the file in front of me and settle on a single sentence floating in the middle of a page: 'We've really hit the jackpot now doll.'

I was far from the first to hit the archival jackpot with crime files at the National Archives for studying domestic and everyday urban life in the past. The CRIM collection represents a selection of depositions and evidence for crimes, mostly murder, tried at the Old Bailey. But these and similar files have been used for everything outside the archival box, from micro to macro: people, places, things, relationships, emotions, cultures, social concerns. Some files are rich and detailed like the first one I saw, some are vast and repetitive, running to several boxes of the same papers over and over and some are frustratingly thin. And we're all interested in different things. I don't spend as long looking at the outdoor crimes. I flick quickly past the stuff that looks like copies of things I've already read. I prioritise the pleasing visual exhibits.

Each of these items within a file represents a fragment of one variation on a narrative. Partial, in more than one sense of the word. To be clear, I'm defining narrative as a story that connects two moments in time, deployed for very particular reasons, with specific aims in mind; to entertain, to persuade, to describe, to justify, to explain, to prosecute, to defend.

Closely tied to narrative is image. I don't mean only shapes on a page, or what something looks like, I also mean imagination, picturing people and places, perhaps as *part* of a narrative, depicting a single moment or suggesting a sequence of events, just occurred or about to, *or* something more abstract - what we might refer to as 'structures of feeling.'

When we think about Britain in the century preceding 1990, key historical narratives and images regarding everyday life and cultural and social change emerge. They have common visual referents. You don't need me to show you a picture or a slide to represent 'slum clearance,' 'urban regeneration,' 'ideal homes,' 'rising living standards,' 'modernisation,' 'affluence' or 'consumption.'

We may all have slightly different interpretations of these terms but there will likely be commonalities. Close your eyes and think about what comes to mind when I say these phrases: 'the 1950s,' 'housewives,' 'post-war migration,' 'London,' 'murder.'

And of course, our interpretations of images are historically and culturally contingent, and they can be mobilised to serve political agendas, or deployed to support narratives, looking backward or forward in time, *with aims as specific as the ones that brought me to the file – selection, partiality.*

What happens when

Then there's this alternative narrative of the same decade coming the other way. Here's the vibrant, dynamic, Southam Street in North Kensington of Roger Mayne's photography, in the same gritty landscape, nostalgically remembered by those moved out in the years that followed to lonely towerblocks, or isolated semis guarded by high privets, where they lost working class community and identity.

Stephen Brooke has considered these competing narratives of the same streets in Mayne's oeuvre and settled on an interpretation of a moment of transition in 1950s North Kensington and in British working-class identities more generally. Brooke argued that Mayne's Southam Street photographs represent a complex reworking, 'in a way that class remained a powerful referent even if inflected by gender, youth, and race.'

But I want to talk about other ways these sorts of narratives and images of working-class domesticity could be used against people, or in their favour, by going indoors.

It's 1956, the same year some of the Mayne photographs were taken. A young couple, Brian and Moira, in their early twenties, have separated - she's gone home to her Mum in South Shields with the baby, he's stayed at home in their rented flat in Appleford Road, London, yards away from where Roger Mayne is photographing the neighbours. They're writing to each other (Brian and Moira) they still love each other, and they've decided to give things another try. One of her conditions is that she wants "a decent home to come home to."

He responds by sprucing up their flat and writes to tell her about it, including samples of wallpaper and little sketches of his handiwork. He describes how he's used matching paints to coordinate with the papers, he's boxed in the fogey old fireplace and exposed pipes, re-plastered the mouldy cupboard where the baby kept his toys. He's got a nice little Axminster rug to match the yellow wallpaper. He uses words like snazzy and contemporary and modern and geometric. He's making the best of things and he's really happy with the results.

This all speaks to an established historical narrative of atomic age design, aspired to by even the working-classes on a modest budget. It fits with descriptions of rising interest in DIY, home improvements, domestic consumerism.

In the same letter he writes:

"One Monday morning some weeks ago... I found the whole of the front of the building covered in scaffolding. Tuesday night when I returned I found they had started a bit of cementing-up patches and Wednesday night it had all gone again! I thought what a waste of time - all that scaffolding just for a few badly done patches. Anyway over the weekend when I saw Betty [their downstairs neighbour] she told me that a Council bloke had seen the men at work and told them they might as well pack it in because the Council were taking over in a year's time. Then I had a letter from the Landlord explaining the sudden discontinuation of the exterior decorating and he assumed that we would be one of the first to be re-housed in the buildings shortly to be erected! All this is on the level and Pam says her 'Kensington Post' has been full of this new slum clearance drive lately so I reckon we'll be sitting pretty soon. Our house has had its marching orders and as soon as the new flats go up we move in and our house comes down. We've really hit the jackpot now Doll."

There's a lot to unpack here. He's done up one of their two rooms and stopped, the landlord isn't investing in the property anymore either now it's been designated a slum, why bother when it will come down soon? (It was years.) But the promise of a council flat with central heating and a bedroom for the baby, no more damp, their own bathroom, fitted carpets! It represents a new start and significantly better surroundings.

But they're worried. There's all the new furniture they'll need, plus the carpets (council places didn't come with them) and even though it's authority housing the rent will be a good deal higher. And Moira was in debt. She'd borrowed on credit and bought from catalogues, and was struggling to manage the household budget. Both Moira and Brian had to work, Brian had to keep up payments on his motorbike that got him to work and back. All these issues complicate a straightforward view of their bright new future in a council flat.

And then.

One Tuesday morning in November 1956 Moira died. She was in the early stages of pregnancy. Brian was arrested and charged with her murder. The investigation by Metropolitan Police and trial at the Old Bailey are the only reason this family's interior lives are recorded and the couple's letters and wallpaper archived. The crime scene photographs, taken after Moira's body had been removed, show the wallpaper he had sent her, the chair he was building, the pipes he'd boxed in.

What's interesting about this is the way that the same narratives and images of Brian and Moira's domesticity were deployed in different ways for and against them.

Counsel for the Crown, prosecuting via the Director of Public Prosecutions, opened the case by telling 'a little of the story, so that you [the jury] may follow the evidence when it is called before you...' He particularly called attention to the subtle differences in class between Moira and Brian. 'She was the illegitimate daughter of a woman called Alice, and from her early days was brought up to believe she was the daughter of her grandmother and that her mother was her sister. She was from South Shields, married to Brian in 1953, she being then under 17 years of age. Six months after the marriage a boy was born... They went to live in a first floor flat in North Kensington, the address being Appleford Road; there was just a bedroom and a kitchen - two rooms. You may think it must have been rather poor accommodation but there they were....'

"She had one trouble, she had not managed the money very well..." Brian's parents lived in a West London suburb, he had benefitted from a better education than his wife and was slightly older. 'He worked as a clerk for a firm of washing machine manufacturers, and was known as a punctual and conscientious worker riding to work every day on his motorcycle combination...'

When the photographs were shown in court, the 'small room,' 'Makeshift furniture,' and 'unfinished chair' were also highlighted. A narrative was constructed in which Brian aspired to a better life, the council flat was key to that ("we've really hit the jackpot"). New house, new furniture, new carpets, same Moira. His tenancy at Appleford Road was the ticket to a brand new council house so when he was arrested he asked the men driving him to prison what would happen to his flat. "I want to keep it on. I might get married again."

Questioned by his defence counsel at the Old Bailey, Brian claimed he had no knowledge of the pregnancy they could ill-afford and could not terminate legally. He didn't know how cyanide from his works' heat treatment room had ended up in her tea. She must have put it there herself, perhaps it was suicide. In support of his counter-narrative, the defence drew out subtle details of Moira's domestic incompetence. His mother never liked her, she didn't look after the baby properly, she wasn't "my sort of housewife".

Prosecution and the police on one side, and defence and the defendant on the other, offered competing narratives to a judge and jury, using the same images. On the one hand, Brian was a saintly husband who had done up their flat for her. On the other, the wallpaper had enticed her home so he could dispense with her permanently and start a new life with their son.

Each deploys recognisable narrative tropes and common images of contemporary working-class domesticity in its own way, shoe-horning them to fit a legal framework - Murder, Manslaughter,

Guilt, Culpability, for both victim and accused. These courtroom narratives were framed by the visual and imagined space of the domestic crime scene represented in the crime scene photographs and Exhibits of evidence in everyday ephemera.

Without considering how these images and narratives were deployed for very specific reasons, we might assume that it was the contents rather than the implications of the domestic setting represented in the crime scene photographs that killed Moira. There are no weapons or clues in these images. And she didn't die because they lived in "rather poor accommodation" or because "she didn't manage the money very well".

Though the Old Bailey jury seemed to ratify the prosecution's narrative by finding Brian guilty of murder, that does not mean they endorsed the motives they suggested. He was sentenced to death but the 1957 Homicide Act was passed within days and so Brian served a prison sentence for his wife's murder. While he was in inside, his beloved flat and the rest of Appleford Road and most of Southam Street were demolished. Trellick Tower was erected on his old doorstep.

Roger Mayne's photography placed working-class life in North Kensington on the streets - not dangerous, mean streets where Antiguan carpenters were murdered on their way home by white strangers, but streets where children played - vibrant, lively, rapidly changing, headed for a positive future. Some interpretations of the same photographs identify something lost since then, community, identity. Crime scene photographs in the same area take us indoors to challenge working-class life as public, domesticity as safe. But they also ask us to challenge interpretations themselves, and ask how and why ~~this image of domesticity could be used both for and against the same people.~~

the same image of domesticity, the same pictures of a room and samples of wallpaper, (the same "council house"), can be used to illustrate entirely different narratives with opposing endings.